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SITUATIONAL INFLUENCE
IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Russell W. Belk

#195

College of Commerce and Business Administration
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



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SITUATIONAL INFLUENCE IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

ABSTRACT

The premise is advanced and supported that situational variables are pervasive and essential elements in explaining consumer behavior. Efforts are made to summarize existing research on situational effects in consumer behavior and to systematize a definition and description of situational influence. A research paradigm is suggested and problems and prospects for this line of research are discussed.

SITUATIONAL INFLUENCE IN CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

Growing recognition of limitations in the ability of individual consumer characteristics to explain variation in buyer behavior has prompted a number of recent please to consider situational influences on behavior. Ward and Robertson argue that "situational variables may account for considerably more variance than actor-related variables," (1973, p. 26). Lavidge cautions that many buyer behaviors may be enacted only under very specific conditions and calls for situational investigations of intra-individual variability (1966). Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell urge that both individual and situational factors must be simultaneously considered in order to explain consumer choices (1969). Nevertheless, these and other suggestions to include situational variables in research on consumer behavior have gone largely unheeded. The primary obstacles to researching situational influence on consumers have been the absences of adequate operational conceptions of situations, and adequate theoretical conceptions of situational effects. It is the purpose of this article to explore such concepts and to suggest a framework for the investigation of situational influence in consumer behavior.

DETERMINANTS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR

In no small measure the reluctance of consumer researchers to study situations may be attributed to the vagueness and inconsistency with which such terms as "situation," "environment," "context," and "circumstances" have been used. Despite frequent use of these terms, it seems no one has ever asked, or certainly answered, the question: What is a situation? It will later be argued that context and circumstances are terms which describe types of situational and environmental effects. But situation and environment themselves represent distinct sources of influence on consumer behavior and should not be used synonymously.

Environment is the broader construct and represents a general milieu of behavior, whereas situation is a more momentary concept. As Lewin (1933) points out, environment may be thought of as the chief characteristics of a more or less permanent "situation". In this sense situations represent episodic encounters with those elements of the total environment which are available to the individual at a particular point in time. Environment is not only broader in terms of the time span which it covers, but also in terms of the geographic area over which it applies. For example, while the phrase "legal environment" might be used to describe laws and legal institutions within or across governmental units, the specific experiences of individual A in courtroom M in city R at 4:00 o'clock on day X, may only be described from a narrower situational perspective.

In order to more fully appreciate the domain of situations in consumer behavior, it is useful to distinguish five major categories of influence which act upon the consumer:

1. Individual Consumer Characteristics -- e.g. personality, intellect, age, and sex
2. Product Offering Characteristics -- e.g. brand name, price, package design, and color
3. Macro Environmental Characteristics -- e.g. cultural values, economic conditions, state of technology, and laws
4. Micro Environmental Characteristics -- e.g. informal group memberships, family relationships, area of residence, and income
5. Situational Characteristics -- e.g. physical surroundings, time frame, interpersonal surroundings, mood, and goal direction

The particular attributes of these influences on consumer behavior are compared in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Individual consumer characteristics are restricted in this case to include only those factors which R.L. Thorndike (1947) has labeled "lasting and general

characteristics of the individual." Such characteristics are lasting in that they are stable over time, and general in that they are stable across situations and environments for a given individual. The second influence listed includes only the marketer controllable aspects of the product offering. Although instances exist wherein a single offering captures a consumer's attention, the characteristics of the offering do not themselves constitute a situation. Like individual characteristics, product offerings have been extensively and fruitfully researched, but generally at the cost of neglecting or controlling out the influence of the diverse environments and situations within which consumer behavior occurs.

The third and fourth categories of behavioral influence separate two levels of environment according to the specificity of their occurrence. The macro environment of consumer behavior represents those aspects of environment which are shared by a large number of consumers as well as institutions operating within their scope. While the study of macro environmental influences offers great hope for understanding long range shifts and cultural differences in consumer behavior, it is of less significance in explaining the immediate choice behavior of a consumer within a given culture. Unlike macro environments, micro environmental characteristics differ from person to person.¹ Changes in such factors as residence, job position, family status, and friendships, are also somewhat controllable environments for the individual, and are thereby conceptually distinct from such uncontrollable demographic characteristics of the individual as age and sex. The marketer's concern with micro environments is reasonably greater than with macro environments, but marketer control over these influences on consumer behavior is still lacking.

Of the five categories of consumer behavior determinants, the most transient as well as most neglected is situational influence. Situations not only differ between individuals and environments, but are also specific to a time and place of occurrence. Consumer situation has been defined as "all those factors parti-

cular to a time and place of observation which do not follow from a knowledge of personal (intra-individual) and stimulus (choice alternative) attributes, and which have a demonstrable and systematic effect on current behavior" (Belk, 1974). Inasmuch as such factors are partially controllable by marketers, these influences have potentially direct strategic implications. Explicitly conceived, situation can serve as far more than an unfortunate source of noise in consumer research and may well prove an essential ingredient in understanding consumer behavior.

It is apparent that all five categories of behavioral influence are interrelated systems. Individual characteristics are shaped and modified by environments in the long run and differentially activated by situations in the short run. Macro environments shape and constrain available micro environments, and both allow and delimit different sets of available situations and product offerings. Also individual characteristics affect an individual's perception of situations, environments, and product offerings, as well as the likelihood that he will encounter various situations. While it is not the intent of this article to attempt anything so elaborate as a theoretical integration of the joint effects of all five systems of influence, it is clear that efforts to develop truly comprehensive models of consumer and market behaviors will need to do so. The concern at the moment is to consider the nature and importance of consumer situations within this scheme.

CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIOR SITUATIONS

Just as it is conceptually helpful to distinguish between micro and macro aspects of a consumer's environment, it is also useful to separate micro and macro components of a situation on the basis of their specificity to the individual. Among the dimensions employed earlier to exemplify situational characteristics, three dimensions, physical surroundings, time frame, and interperson-

al surroundings, may be used to describe a time and place of observation for all persons who may be present. These characteristics, when they are externally observed or manipulated, represent the macro components of a situation. As Boulding (1966, pp. 3-18) notes, these dimensions gain meaning and effect only through the perceptions of the individual. But these characteristics also have objective referents which may be independently measured and aggregated across individuals. This is not the case for the remaining two components of a situation. Indeed mood and goal direction might be considered as individual characteristics were they stable and general enough to be invariant over times and places of measurement. However these internal states are specific to the occasion, may not be predicated solely on the basis of individual or product offering characteristics, and are therefore considered to be micro situational characteristics.² Although they have no direct objective referents, the micro components of a situation may be thought to emerge from perceptions of the macro situation, based on the individual's prior situational and anticipated future situational experiences. By assuming and testing that similar prior and anticipated situations produce similar moods and goal objectives in consumers, operational control is also possible in researching the effects of these micro situational characteristics. The following descriptions give some idea of possible variations in each component of situation, and illustrative research suggesting their importance in shaping consumer behavior.

1. Physical Surroundings in a situation may be externally specified in a range of detail including geographical and institutional location, configurations of objects, sounds, and aromas present, and proximity to other objects and institutions. From the individual's perspective, these characteristics may be personalized to reflect familiarity, neighborhood, or more symbolic interpretations such as atmosphere. Research on the effects of selected aspects of physical surroundings in consumer situations is fairly abundant. Evidence exists

documenting the purchase effects of shelf arrangements (Cox, 1964, 1970; Krueckenberg, 1969; Kotzan and Evanson, 1969; Fladmark and Bennett, 1969), point of purchase displays (McKenna, 1966; McClure and West, 1969), display location (Kennedy, 1970), store layout (Colonial Study, 1964), and product assortment (Alderson and Sessions, 1962). Other evidence compares the incidence of certain product purchases in home versus retail outlet sales settings (Spense, Engel, and Blackwell, 1970). Physical surroundings have also been shown to influence word of mouth behavior (Belk, 1971). On a larger geographic scale, a variety of investigations have been conducted on the effects of space, distance, and institutional locations on consumer shopping behavior (Berry, 1967; Golledge and Zannaras, 1973, pp. 67-72; Andreason and Durksen, 1968).

2. Time frame is objectively measured in units ranging from time at a given instant to season of the year. Consumer interpretations of this situational component typically reflect time relative to some past or future event. Time since last purchase, time since or until meals, and time constraints imposed by other events are examples of the personal time frames which may result. DeGrazia (1962), Foote (1966), Robinson and Converse (1966), and Bull (1971) describe several studies of frequencies and preferences in time allocation by consumers, and Schary (1971) suggests a further framework for investigations of temporal effects on consumer behavior. Time since meals has been shown to affect supermarket shopping behavior (Nisbett and Kanouse, 1968), and time since last purchase has been observed to affect brand loyalty (Kuehn, 1962). The effects of the time of day, week, month, and season on aggregate shopping behavior are also widely recognized.

3. Interpersonal surroundings may be externally described as those present, their apparent roles, and the interpersonal interactions occurring within a situation. These characteristics are amplified by the individual primarily according to his perceptions of these others present. Such persons may be viewed as familiar or unfamiliar, expert or naive, warm or cold, critical or accepting, or as

possessing a variety of other traits and meanings. Willett and Pennington (1966), Pennington (1968), and Olshavsky (1972) report the effects of a variety of bargaining variables in buyer and seller interaction on purchase outcomes. The mere presence of children (Wells and LoSciuto, 1966), Friends (Bell, 1967), and sales personnel (Albaum, 1967) have also been found to alter buying behavior. Tucker (1964) provides a conceptual framework for explaining such effects, and Wackman (1973) discusses theoretical perspectives for researching the influence of this situational component.

4. Mood characteristics of situations may be identified by such dimensions as anxiety, pleasantness, hostility, contemplativeness, and excitation. That certain dimensions of moods may be influenced by music (Rigg, 1964) and dramatic presentations (Axelrod, 1964; Crane, 1964) may represent a promising opportunity for marketers. By manipulating prior activities to affect moods it has been demonstrated that choice of leisure activities can be affected (Witt and Bishop, 1970). Evidence is also available confirming that certain mood states are affected by the foregoing situational characteristics and that behaviors may vary as a result (Endler and Hunt, 1968).

5. Goal direction is basically a reflection of a consumer's view of his task at a place and point in time. Examples of such task elements of a situation include selecting, shopping for, or obtaining information about a general or specific purchase. In addition, task may reflect different buyer and user roles anticipated by the individual. For instance, the person shopping for a small appliance as a wedding gift for a friend is employing a different definition of task than he would be in shopping for a small appliance for personal use. Goal direction can also include circumstances ostensibly unrelated to purchase behavior, as when unexpectedly encountering a door-to-door or telephone solicitation in the home. Thus goal direction may be conceived as a momentary description of buyer expectations and intent with regard to activity and direction of behavior.

Research relevant to the effects of this situational characteristic is found with regard to usage contexts (Sandell, 1968a; Kamen and Eindoven, 1963; Robertson, 1970, p. 205), gift-giving occasions (Lowes, Turner, and Wills, 1971; Grønhaug, 1972), and word of mouth conversational contexts (Belk, 1971). Nehnevajsa (1963) provides further discussion of the effects of goal direction on behavior.

These five characteristics of situations are not the only means possible to describe a situation, but they are broad and rich enough categories to allow other descriptions to be subsumed within them. Together the findings just discussed indicate we know a great deal more about situations than may have been suspected. For the most part the preceding studies have employed aggregate dependent measures such as sales volume, without regard to individual differences in susceptibility to situational influence. It is especially noteworthy therefore that so many positive findings have obtained; for it is probably as shortsighted to expect situations to affect behavior across persons as it is to expect personality to affect behavior across situations. The weight of the evidence cited is also surprising in light of the fact that many of these findings were serendipitous in studies examining non-situational influences. What has been discovered in these studies may well reflect only extreme situational effects, just as what has been learned concerning the effects of individual characteristics on consumer behavior may represent only the most extreme effects which are able to overwhelm situational influence. More systematic efforts to consider the overall importance and nature of situational influence in consumer behavior add perspective to these isolated findings, and are reviewed in the following section.

MAGNITUDE OF SITUATIONAL INFLUENCE

Compared to the evidence bearing on the effects of the separate components of situations, estimations of the overall influence of consumer behavior situations relative to other behavioral influences are few. The primary investigations

to date have been analyses of variance of responses to inventories incorporating situational scenarios and behavioral alternatives. Patterning themselves after situational inventories of anxiety and hostility responses (Endler, Hunt, and Rosenstein, 1962), these instruments typically measure preferences for buying or consuming alternative products under an array of conditions suggesting various configurations of situational characteristics. For example, respondents might be asked the likelihood that they would choose each of several snack products while watching television, while hosting a party, or while engaged in other situations related to eating, serving or purchasing snack products. In several developmental studies the preferences measured in this manner tend to show acceptable levels of reliability (Belk, 1974), and higher predictive validity than attitudinal models not specifying situations (Wicker, 1971). Analyses of these inventories provide comparisons of the relative contributions of individuals, situations, response alternatives, and their interactions, to variance in response preferences. The results of these studies are summarized in Table 2 for the several consumer response categories thus far investigated.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Whereas a substantial response main effect in these inventories would suggest that there are important product or leisure activity preference patterns which hold across persons and situations, a sizeable effect for persons, situations, or the interaction of these two variance components, would only be interpreted as a superfluous response style. With this in mind it is understandable and encouraging that these latter effects are negligible for all inventories. A more dominant influence is the situation by response interaction, especially for the meat and beverage inventories. This is the variance component which directly reflects the influence of systematic situational differences in preferences for

the various response alternatives. Furthermore, the essentially identical response and person by response effects in these two inventories suggest, respectively, that individual and generalized product preference orderings are influential but substantially less important determinants of consumer preferences than are situational conditions. For the snack product and leisure activity inventories, situational influence is less pronounced, but is still an important influence on preferences. The motion picture inventory results however present an exception to the otherwise substantial role of situations in affecting consumer preferences. For the hypothetical movie descriptions employed, the effect of individual differences in preference patterns across situations ($P \times R$) is dominant. A lesser influence in this inventory is the effect of general motion picture preferences (R) across the samples of both persons and situations.

The size of the residual components of unexplained variance appears inversely related to the importance of the situation by response term for these inventories. While this finding is tentative, it suggests that an understanding of consumer situations may yield sizeable improvements in the predictability of consumer behavior in sensitive product categories. The preference inventories present a range of variation in situational influence from the relatively large role in beverages to the negligible role in motion pictures. Where the role of situations is large it assumes greater importance than individual differences ($P \times R$) and product characteristics, (R), but it seems untenable that this dominance will be found in all consumer product categories.

Additional evidence of the importance of consumer situations is found in multidimensional scaling studies under varied situational scenarios (Green and Rao, 1972) and in consumer choice experiments introducing situational conditons (Hansen, 1968). These results reveal perceptual, attitudinal, and decisional influences from situations in addition to the preference effects just noted. Sandell (1968b) provides some external validity for these findings as well in several experiments in which behavioral

responses in product choice were conditioned to specific situational stimuli.

Beyond the immediate implication that consumer behavior can be highly situation dependent, these studies show that researching such effects is feasible and enlightening. Not all of these studies have utilized all five of the components of situation, but across the inventories various combinations of all components have been operationalized. Both brief scenario descriptions and manipulations of actual situations have demonstrated that situations can be experimentally studied, and that the ability to account for variation in consumer behaviors may be significantly enhanced as a result. What remains to be accomplished to impel a comprehensive program of situation based consumer research, is a theoretical conception of situational influence.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS OF SITUATIONAL EFFECTS

General Theories of Situational Influence

In a recent position paper, Wicker (1972) succinctly summarizes four theoretical bases on which situational effects may be predicated. Operant learning theory suggests that behavioral dependencies on situation may be acquired through operant conditioning of responses to particular situations. Vicarious learning involves only observing or imitating the behavior of others and represents a second process in acquiring distinct response patterns which are evoked by situational cues. In order to consider the way in which individuals select the settings they will enter, Wicker suggests an adaptation of social exchange theory. By substituting situations for one of the members of the interpersonal dyad which is used as the basic unit of analysis in social exchange theory, it may be possible to predict the situations a person will seek and avoid, as well as the behavioral outcomes of alternative situations. A fourth theory of situational influence labeled behavioral setting theory, derives from a dynamic information processing model proposed by Barker (1968). This perspective is primarily con-

cerned with the reasons and actions a person may invoke in maintaining agreeable situations in which he is involved. Whereas the first two learning theories may be quite helpful in understanding how situational effects come about, the last two theories may prove especially useful in learning more about the nature of situational effects and in explaining how individuals and situations interact in the on-going processes of behavior.

The theories above represent conceptual output from the rapidly emerging discipline of environmental or ecological psychology (Barker, 1963, 1968; Craik, 1970; Proshansky, Littelson, and Rivlin, 1970; Littelson, 1973). Although this area of inquiry has also produced a substantial stream of research, to date most of the efforts in this tradition appear more attuned to environmental influences, as the term has been used here, than to situational effects. The same emphasis coupled with varied definitions of environments and situations has been followed by earlier research traditions in psychology (e.g. Lewin, 1938, 1947, 1958; Pepinsky, 1961; Allen, 1965; Wendelin, 1970) and sociology (e.g. Thomas, 1927; Volkart, 1951; Cottrell, 1951; Gordon, 1952; Nasir, 1968; Warner and Defleur, 1969) as well. As a result of the diversity of perspectives which these and similar formulations employ, there exists no widely accepted and exhaustively explicated theory of general situational influence. Work related to Lewin's field theory is the most completely developed, but this work is related to the individual's total psychological environment and transcends the current focus on situations.

Situational Effects in Consumer Behavior

The literature of consumer behavior contains several elaborated notions of situational and environmental effects, especially in the comprehensive models of Nicosia (1966), Howard and Sheth (1969), Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1972), and Hansen (1972). While these models all employ some conception of situations and environments, they too are plagued by a lack of agreement as to what consti-

tutes and differentiates such factors. Nevertheless, three common explanations of situational influence may be seen to emerge from these treatments. The three implicit types of situational influence may be viewed as the "contextual", "arousal", and "stimulus" aspects of situational effect.

1. Situational contexts act to constrain or enable behavior through the consumer's concern for the appropriateness of alternative behaviors within a given setting. For familiar consumption events such as family meals, parties, or snacks, the consumer tends to define "relevant" choices according to prior experiences in these situations (Kamen and Eindhoven, 1963; Sandell, 1968a; Belk, 1974). For less familiar or unexpected situations the consumer is able to invoke the nature of the situational context in order to justify a wide range of behavior. In doing so he is offering the rationalization that the conditions surrounding his purchase or consumption decision were somehow atypical and that the rules for evaluating his behavior should be different than if the situation were more "normal". The context might be claimed to be atypical for instance, when the consumer is unfamiliar with a retail institution (Martineau, 1958) or neighborhood (Bell, 1969), or when he is faced with limited alternatives (Anderson, Taylor, and Holloway, 1966).

Nicosia (1966) notes that consumer environments possess comparable constraining and enabling influences which have long been recognized in economic models employing such environmental characteristics as prices and income to predict consumer behavior. But whereas environments such as income typically act as real constraints and enablers, situations more often involve symbolic restrictions and allowances. For example, where anonymity or privacy is provided by a situation, a different set of allowable roles may be made available to the consumer than would be appropriate in more public contexts (Goffman, 1959, 1963). In this case the alternative behaviors which the individual might elect assume added meaning

based upon their anticipated consequences within the particular situation. This type of situational influence is probably the most widely recognized in casual references to situation, but contextual effects are often coarse and imprecise compared to other sources of situational influence which may be present.

2. Situational arousal mechanisms are an aspect of situational influence in which the situation itself has a potential to motivate or trigger specific behaviors. Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1972) recognize such a function in their specification of "precipitating circumstances" in consumer behavior. Hansen (1972) and Venkatesan (1973) attribute the situational determinants of arousal to the collative properties of a situation, such as its novelty, surprisingness, and incongruity. Some impulse purchasing for instance may result from the affective states brought about in mood-inducing situations such as a "carnival atmosphere" (Lavidge, 1966). A bit more broadly conceived, such effects have been labeled "self-transcending emotional states" (Koestler, 1964). That is, the individual is spurred to an action in some cases by surrendering his identity and acting as a part of the situation in which he is immersed.

But the triggering function of situations also operates at a more obvious level, as when an emergency situation requires some immediate action. For example, when an automobile breaks down or is about to run out of gasoline while traveling, these conditions usually act to precipitate fairly immediate behavior. In a situation such as this both precipitating circumstances for action and constraints on available alternatives are present but remain distinct aspects of situational influence. Furthermore, non-emergency situations may precipitate behavior without constraining choices. For instance, a neighbor's new automobile may spur a hesitant prospective automobile buyer to action without affecting the range of brands and models from which he then chooses. Katona (1960) makes a similar point in arguing that sudden changes in environmental variables, such as upwards jumps in salary, have arousal potentials like those of situations and be-

yond their mere enabling effects.

3. Situational stimuli act to orient and direct behavior, rather than to enable, constrain, or trigger it. Each of the consumer behavior models emphasizes situational stimulus effects on consumer search and decision processes. In general, a direct relationship is predicted between the complexity of situational stimuli and the extent of these processes. In addition to this general orienting function of situational stimuli, the situation may set in motion more specific cuing processes which direct behavior. Howard and Sheth (1969) specify that similarities in cues and stimuli across situations may lead to generalized patterns of behavior in related buying situations. Engel, Kollat, and Blackwell (1972) hypothesize a complimentary notion of expectation and discriminative learning based on situational cues. Most of the evidence cited earlier with regard to the effects of various in-store factors can be attributed to this aspect of situational influence.

Boulding (1966) provides an intriguing discussion of the ways in which more subtle situational cues may act to orient behavior as well. For instance, in addition to those past experiences for which the relative success of an action has been directly attributed to the situations in which it took place, prior encounters with various situational cues may also have become associated with certain unarticulated emotions arising from these situations. If a certain situation was boring, demeaning, or challenging, cue similarities in future situations may act to create anticipations of comparable effects and a suitable set of defensive, receptive, or other behaviors may be unconsciously called forth as a result.

The contextual, arousal, and stimulus functions of situational influence may all be present in a given consumer situation, but it is doubtful that they would ever all be absent. However there may be an absence of notable situational effects in some consumer behaviors for several reasons. In some instances the effects of individual characteristics or product characteristics may simply

overpower situational influences. Also it is unreasonable to expect all persons, with necessarily varied experiences, to be susceptible to a particular set of situational conditions. Some may fail to perceive situational cues, contexts, and imperatives, while others may have successfully conditioned themselves to ignore such inputs. Furthermore, participation in many situations is under the control of the individual. All of these possibilities are ill-researched however and need to be considered in a systematic program of situational consumer research.

A PARADIGM FOR RESEARCH

The figure below presents a micro behavioral description of the relationships between situations and consumer behavior.

INSERT FIGURE ABOUT HERE

The variables on the left involve three levels of description of the individual. Specific situational behaviors are directed by manifest personal characteristics which arise from what were previously referred to as lasting and general characteristics of the individual. But at each level of individual description there are also inputs from the condition-specific variables noted on the right. Environments act in the long run to determine much of the individual's unique underlying characteristics. More immediately, the mood and goal direction components of a situation help to create a set of manifest characteristics which guide the consumer in his attention to and perception of the more objective components of the situation. Together with the manifest person characteristics, these physical, temporal, and interpersonal aspects of the situation then determine the specific behavior enacted in each situation. Finally, the experience of each behavioral act, such as asking a sales clerk for advice, may result in modifications of manifest characteristics, and this change may in

turn alter the consumer's definition of the situation and his locus within it. These latter relationships expand the rather static view of situation employed thus far, into a more dynamic view of situational episodes with a past, present, and future, and within which each of the three types of situational effects may be operative.

The hypothetical constructs in the center column are abstractions of the influences of condition-specific variables on individual characteristics and behaviors. Constructs used to represent underlying person characteristics are not subject to situational influence and will not be discussed further. The remaining constructs though, represent alternative approaches to the study of situational influence at the micro behavioral level. The personal characteristics made manifest in different consumer situations and their effects on the selection and perception of situations may be approached through the constructs of situational expectations and situational attitudes. Sheth (1971) employs one type of situational expectations in suggesting that it is necessary to distinguish between elements of the situation which the consumer is able and unable to anticipate. Moreover he has found specifications of unanticipated situations to be useful in predicting multiple criterion behavior sets. Others (e.g. Fishbein, 1967; Rokeach, 1967; Hendrickson, 1967; Howard and Ostlund, 1973) have suggested that some conception of situational attitudes is needed to predict consumer choices within these situations more adequately. At this level of the paradigm these are attitudes toward the situation itself rather than attitudes towards actions or objects within it. The figure above suggests that situational expectations and attitudes may be of greatest use in understanding which situations the consumer will enter and in determining the extent to which situational exposure is a matter of choice. Even more importantly, these are the constructs which are needed to compare the situation as measured by its objective referents to the situation as perceived by the consumer.

Either a perceptual or objective measuring scheme might be utilized to define situations for the construct labeled "disposition of individual i to make response j in situation k." The external specification however, is considerably easier to aggregate in a manner which may be of use to marketers and public policy agencies. This is the perspective employed thus far and with some success in the situational inventories. The resulting measures of response dispositions as a concurrent function of the person, response alternative, and situation, is appealing on both intuitive and theoretical grounds. In addition to allowing experimental designs which apportion variance among these sources of influence, this construct allows the derivation of a three part classification of types of products (or other responses) preferred by types of consumers within types of situations (Belk, 1974). Such descriptions should be more directly related to behavior than the constructs of situational expectations and attitudes, but they are also less revealing in exploring the processes of situational influence.

PROBLEMS, PROSPECTS, AND PROCEDURES

Several problems in researching consumer situations, as well as possible solutions have been discussed to this point. These include the discrepancies prevalent in definitions of situation and its components, differences in individual susceptibility to situational effects, perceptual versus objective specifications of situations, and potential difficulties in meaningfully aggregating perceptual situations. While these problems require careful attention in designing situational research, they are neither too imposing or incapable of resolution to diminish such efforts. A more difficult problem requiring further discussion is found with regard to consumer self-selection of situations. This means not only that attempts to influence consumer behavior through manipulations of purchase situations may fail if the situation is not encountered frequently enough, but also that empirical evidence of situational effects may be misleading

if not obtained in an unobtrusive field setting. The scenarios used in measuring the magnitude of composite situation influence took some precautions that the situations employed were commonly experienced by all subjects, but descriptive evidence of the frequencies and generality of situational experiences is non-existent. Prototypical studies of broader activity categories are available (Szalai, 1966), but are not defined to include detailed consumer situational categories. Thus, there is clearly an urgent need for such information, and its collection must be in painstaking detail. Other research into situational effects need not stop in the mean time, but it must be realized that generalization of findings is contingent upon the amount and patterns of exposure which exist for the situations examined.

The prospects for better understanding the influence of consumer behavior situation, and through this understanding improving the explanability and predictability of consumer behavior, are highly promising empirically, excellent theoretically, and nearly unlimited given past neglect of this universal dimension of behavior. Opportunities for improved predictability using situations as intervening variables seem especially likely in the areas of consumer attitudes and personality. Situational marketing segmentation and product positioning seem reasonable areas of managerial applications of these findings, and consumer protection policies such as unit pricing also seem likely beneficiaries of situational consumer research. Finally, many of the separate theories and hypotheses which presently employ explicit but ill-researched notions of situational influence (e.g. cognitive dissonance, attribution theory, multi-attribute attitudinal models) should welcome facilitating developments which better define and operationalize the concept of situation.

In pursuing these goals, the immediate and long range tasks of situational research should then be to:



1. Enumerate combinations of situational characteristics comprising the population of potential consumer behavior situations.
2. Accumulate data on the overall frequency and population distribution of such situations.
3. Extend studies of the importance and nature of consumer situations to additional behaviors and product categories.
4. Investigate the determinants of differences in individual susceptibility to situational effects, and to each separate process of situational influence.
5. Formulate a comprehensive model of situational influence in consumer behavior.
6. Test the marginal predictive efficiency of this model in naturally occurring consumer situations.
7. Incorporate this model into the broader schemas of the models and hypotheses of buyer behavior.

It is essential in developing this line of research that the admonitions of care in defining and employing situations be heeded by all. Without this thread of consistency, the nature of situations, environments, contexts, and circumstances will come to appear even more vague, contradictory, and meaningless than has unnecessarily resulted from their prior usage.

CONCLUSION

In terms of immediate implications it is primarily hoped that this discussion demonstrates that the unknown realm of situational effects is penetrable. It is also felt that this article makes some progress toward establishing a standard conception of situation and provides some insight into the nature of situational influence. The fact remains, however, that situations will persist in nearly endless variety regardless of the means by which they are categorized. Since the same may be said of consumers, the task of fully understanding the effects of situations is no more or less imposing. At this point the study of situations suffers to a greater extent only from a lack of research. This is therefore an important juncture. It is becoming apparent that further neglect of sit-

uations in consumer behavior can worsen not only the prospects of understanding situational effects, but also the prospects of understanding the consumer.

TABLE 1
CHARACTERISTICS OF CONSUMER BEHAVIORAL INFLUENCES

ATTRIBUTE	BEHAVIORAL INFLUENCE				
	Consumer Characteristics	Product Offerings	Macro Environments	Micro Environments	Situations
Person Specific	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Time Specific	No	Partially	Partially	Partially	Yes
Place Specific	No	Partially	Partially	Partially	Yes
Culture Specific	Partially	Partially	Yes	Partially	Partially
Product Specific	No	Yes	No	No	Partially
Consumer Controllable	No	No	No	Partially	Partially
Marketer Controllable	No	Yes	No	No	Partially

TABLE 2
ANALYSES OF CONSUMER BEHAVIORAL VARIANCE
(PERCENTS OF TOTAL VARIANCE)

SOURCE	RESPONSE CATEGORY				
	Beverage Products ^a	Meat Products ^b	Snack Products ^c	Leisure Activities ^d	Motion Pictures ^c
Persons (P)	0.5%	4.6%	6.7%	4.5%	0.9%
Situations (S)	2.7%	5.2%	0.4%	2.0%	0.5%
Responses (R)	14.6%	15.0%	6.7%	8.8%	16.6%
R x S	39.8%	26.2%	18.7%	13.4%	7.0%
P x S	2.7%	2.9%	6.1%	4.0%	1.9%
P x R	11.8%	9.7%	22.4%	21.2%	33.7%
R x S x R	— e	— e	3.4%	— e	— e
Residual	<u>27.8%^f</u>	<u>36.4%</u>	<u>35.6%</u>	<u>46.1%</u>	<u>39.4%</u>
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

^a (Sandell, 1968a); n=31

^b (Belk, 1974); n=100

^c (Belk, 1973); n=100

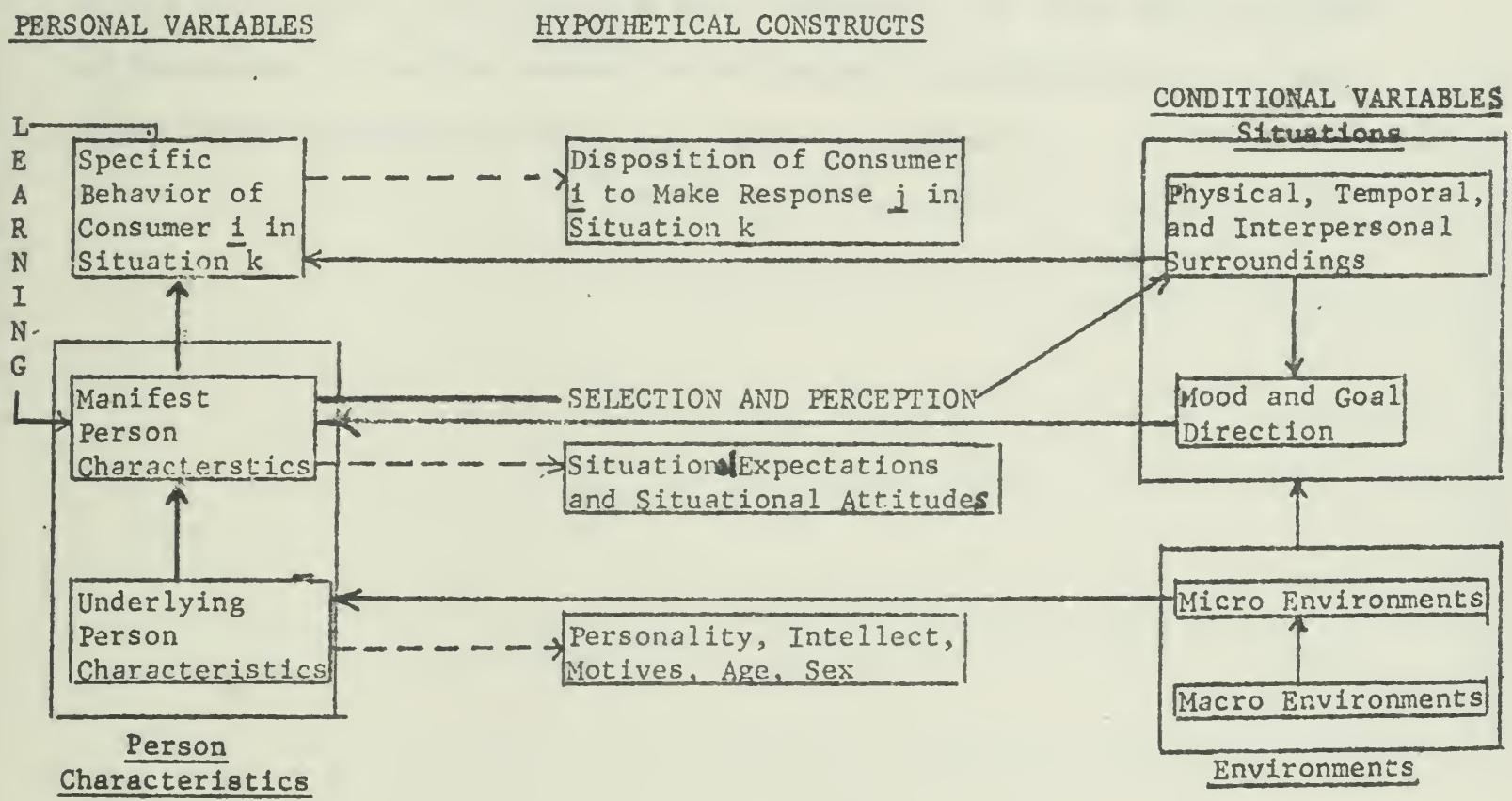
^d (Bishop and Witt, 1970) means of 4 samples; total n=140

e not obtained

f incorrectly reported as entirely

P x S x R

FIGURE
A PARADIGM OF SITUATIONAL INFLUENCE
ON CONSUMER BEHAVIOR



REFERENCES

1

In a broader frame of reference, micro environments of a similar nature may be seen to surround marketer behaviors; in which case these characteristics differ from organization to organization.

2

This classification of mood and goal direction as micro situational characteristics is somewhat oversimplified for the sake of the present discussion. A more analytically precise classification would recognize that these characteristics are independent of neither personal or situational variables and are in fact a higher order interaction of these two sources of influence.

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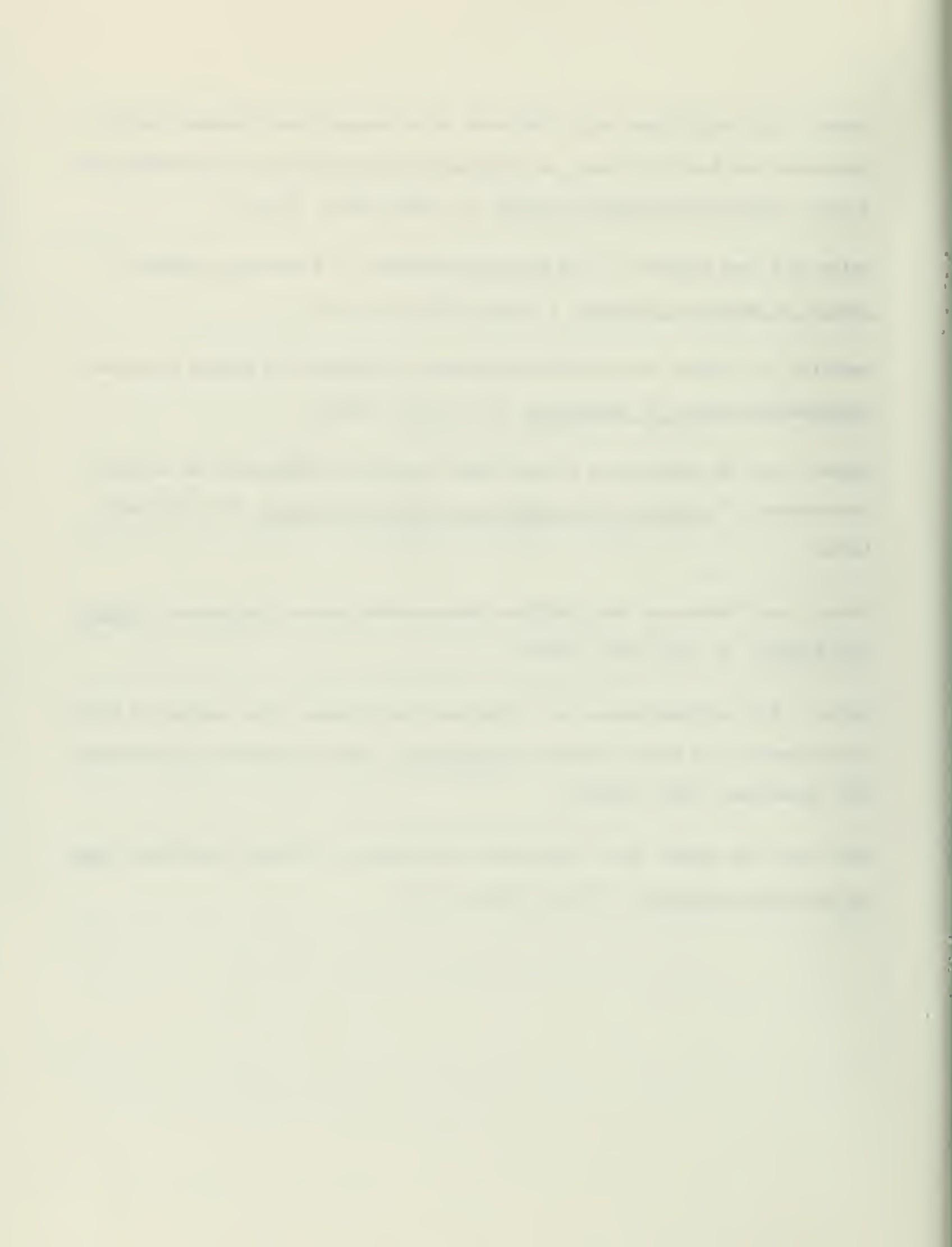
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